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Doing Leadership: Caring for our Communities

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Abstract

This is the story of one interpreter's pathway into the field of interpreting. During an interview that took place on July 24, 2014, she shared her concerns for the community of signed language interpreters and her aspirations for us to do more. She demonstrates for us that leadership may take a variety of forms; It can happen behind the scenes, in service positions, or through the encouragement and support of others. We learn that personal growth happens just by virtue of being present and open to the people and opportunities that surround us. Always fueled by a desire to do, give, and love more, Jeannette Ocampo "JO" Welch teaches us how to be compassionate practitioners and leaders in the field of signed language interpreting.

The early years

Jeannette Ocampo "JO" Welch lovingly tells the story of how her parents arrived in New York as a result of her father chasing her mother to America. Though she did not realize it early on, as the first daughter of two Columbian immigrants who are now citizens, JO has always been an interpreter at heart. At home, JO's parents thought it was important as immigrants to focus on English language acquisition. Two years later when her brother was born they switched the focus back to Spanish, and then, when they thought that was confusing, they moved back to English as their primary language. As a result of those early years, JO's first language is English. Spanish and American Sign Language (ASL) are her second languages. JO describes her expressive Spanish as accented. While she identifies as a Latina woman who is trilingual, she currently avoids marketing herself as an ASL/English/Spanish interpreter because she is aware that Spanish language interpreting is complex and requires the same dedication as ASL interpreting.

How she got here

JO's first exposure to ASL came in the eighth grade when she met a classmate who was Deaf. Their schooling took them separate ways and it was not until after high school that JO re-encountered her former classmate and friend, John Paul Jebian. "Mortified" that she had nothing to say because she had forgotten the sign language that she learned from this friend, she turns from her degree in theater that she is not really happy with and begins taking ASL courses in 1993 at Miami Dade College.

In her second semester of ASL, JO, along with about six others, was recruited by Jason Southwell Hay, along with several dedicated colleagues, to fill the need for interpreters in the educational system that existed at the time. JO both says, "Don't try this at home", and "it was magic". Her passion for mentoring, expanding her knowledge base, and ASL advocacy were sparked. By 1994 she worked for the school system, was state screened at a QA (quality assurance) level 2, and received her Educational Interpreter Evaluation,(EIE) a credential for interpreters working in the state of Florida. Just one year after her first ASL class, JO was not only a credentialed interpreter, she was accepted into the week long intensive program for interpreters held at Gallaudet University.

On being present



When I asked JO how she created leadership opportunities for herself, her response was humble. She says, "I wasn't prompted to make leadership opportunities for myself. I was present and open to being a part of something." Being present afforded JO the opportunity to touch many paths throughout the course of her career. One such opportunity presented itself when Betty Colonomos came to JO's community and encouraged the interpreters within the educational system to strive for something greater. At the time various coding systems for English were being heavily used in the Florida educational system. JO and her cohort were passionate with their desire to learn ASL and traveled across the state taking linguistic courses as well as a course on idioms which was taught by Dr. Jeff Davis who eventually became JO's mentor.

Dr. Davis could see JO's potential for more, but without holding her bachelor's degree her opportunities would be limited. JO was also aware of herself as a person, she knew she had energy, and she frequently refers to herself as action verb. She is a doer! What she understood then was that the field of interpreting was a fertile environment and that something was going to happen for her. It was being open and present that allowed JO to act on the advice from Dr. Davis. Though she had family, friends, a boyfriend, a dog, and a career in Miami, JO packed up and moved from sunny Miami to Boston in the middle of winter. She began attending Northeastern University (NU). By the time JO graduates with honors from NU in 1997, she holds two state certifications, and is already a working interpreter.

It was during her time at NU that JO's identity as an interpreter of color emerged. She was the only student of color in her class. While living in Miami it never occurred to JO that she needed her interpreter of color identity because in that world everyone was a person of color. At least, "they were all brown to me," she says. The environment at NU invited her identity as an interpreter of color to grow. She reflects, "It had to in the absence of having that part of myself nurtured and wanting to nurture it for and with other people."

Between 1998 and 1999 JO held part time positions at the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing as a referral specialist, at the Boston Arts Academy high school as an interpreter (perfect given her background in the arts), and she took on part time work with the Deaf Blind Contact Center (DBCC) which is a social and recreational program for Deaf Blind adults where she was also introduced to American Association for the Deaf Blind and the supportive Deaf Blind community network. 1999 was a good year! It was also during this year that the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) National Conference came to Boston. JO attended the RID conference for the first time and remained open to the leadership opportunities that would begin to present themselves to her.

Doing leadership

Although accomplished in a very short period of time, JO was still new to the field of interpreting. This was her first time attending the RID national conference, and it was also the first time that Mano a Mano, an organization which promotes the growth of Spanish/ASL/English interpreters (Mano a Mano, 2014), hosted a pre-conference session. She thanks Christopher S. Robinson, who JO describes as a connector, for finding JO and soliciting her help. Connectors are people who have relationships with an above average number of people and who seek to bring other people together if they seem to have a common purpose (Bowen-Bailey, 2014). As a result of the connections that were made, JO volunteers and does whatever is needed in order to help. “Whatever you need me to do”, she says, “that is how involvement begins.”

Two years later, Mano a Mano hosts its pre-conference at the RID national conference in Orlando, Florida. Angela Roth, now the international chair for Mano a Mano, asks for help with entertainment back stage. JO handles costumes backstage for all of the artists, as well as for the outgoing and incoming RID presidents. Being present to, and being a part of something is what allowed JO to make connections with the then current president of RID. Mano a Mano has had a huge impact on JO’s entry into leadership and she has been involved with the organization ever since.

JO is a promoter for trilingual interpreting. Although she is not a current practitioner of trilingual interpreting, she understands that there is still space for her to be able to make contributions to her community. As a Latina and an interpreter, while she has had substantial opportunities to nourish the ASL and Deaf culture part of her world, she does not have enough exposure to the larger picture in Spanish and actively seeks ways to improve in that area as well.

She went to the Mano a Mano pre-conference in Orlando one week early and with the support of Gilberto García Camacho, a trilingual interpreter from Puerto Rico, and her father by phone, she worked to translate the program book. She slept on Angela’s couch for a week. When the opportunity was there, JO stepped into it and as a result built her understanding of the politics of

the profession and of how things were run behind the scenes. She credits her knowledge of politics to the great people who were willing to talk things through. Being present and open allowed her to work with people who could provide a variety of perspectives.

Prior to 2004, JO began her service to the RID Special Interest Group (SIG), Interpreters and Translators of Color (ITOC). Persis Bristol and Emilia Lorenti-Wann, among others, suggested that JO run for the Region I ITOC representative position in 2004. When the Chair position became available JO accepted the nomination. She remembers being in the middle of a job, walking to the bathroom, and being asked if she accepted the nomination. She said yes. When the job was over, she was congratulated, and then, through her work with the SIG, she began the work of learning how to further navigate the system of RID.

“In leadership I think sometimes we lose that institutional memory. With ITOC I saw so much but it was never clear how the people who follow will have access to that rich history and we should know it,” she says. JO saw ITOC through the transition from Special Interest Group to that of Member Section with the help of Bruce King and other SIG leaders. She spoke about the powerful response received from the membership in regards to a policy that required 50 trilingual participants to be registered at RID conferences before providing trilingual interpreting services. She was also present when RID issued an apology to the ITOC membership for creating such a policy. A part of being present is recognizing that there is a lot of history that comes with being at any place at any given time and there are lessons learned. Later, JO moved from leadership in ITOC into leadership with RID’s Interpreters in Educational and Instructional Settings (IEIS) Member Section where she also served as their Region I representative.

I have seen JO as a role model working as a conference interpreter at several national conferences. In fact, she has worked every national conference since 2003 and even when not hired, by being available and open, she still managed to be involved. She attributes the beginning of her conference interpreting experience to Laurie Shaffer and Boston’s local Interpreters of Color leadership who started a mentorship program for conference interpreters of color under the Boston University Center for Interpreter Education (BUCIE). The goal was to provide support for and increase the number of interpreters of color at conferences. JO strongly believes in

connecting with interpreters of color. She says, “if people of color are coming together to do something locally, then I am going to show up over there because I need to feel supported by the community and cultural values that we share...because you notice that when it is missing.”

Community, culture, and identity

JO says that the most important skill for interpreters to have, “is the ability to know that you don’t know something.” We all want affirmation and to be loved, but knowing when you do not have the answers and being able to have humility can be tough and time consuming. This is especially important considering the multicultural conversation. This means that as interpreters we work with consumers and colleagues from a variety of diverse backgrounds. Understanding each other requires that we become sensitive to the needs of the communities that we work with and serve. The work we do requires sacrifice and effort. One does not begin to arrive at that understanding of others without making deliberate moves in that direction. She believes that because interpreters work with individuals from various backgrounds its worth, “finding out more about that culture because there is stuff we are not able to see until we know more.” JO recalls the Minority Interpreter Group (MIG) that started out as the Minority Interpreter Support Group/TRIBE under BUCIE. She says, “When I moved to Boston these interpreters of color were part of the community that shaped me and my work. I am grateful and blessed for the years and the work we have done together.”

Today, she has been in the profession for over 20 years and currently works at Boston University as the Coordinator of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, and is the Director for BUCIE. Though she has a wide range of skills she has little to no experience in medical, social services, or legal interpreting settings, but foresees this work in her future. She is a reflective practitioner who engages in deliberate practice opportunities to increase her skills in ASL. The Etna Project trainings by Betty Colonomos (2014) and the Demand Control Schema by Dean and Pollard (2013) have had significant impact on her work.

She has participated in the Julliard theatrical interpreting program, she went to Big Spring, Tx for the trilingual interpreting program, and went to Helen Keller National Center for their Deaf

Blind program. She has attended several other niche, week long immersive trainings which have impacted her professional development. As a profession, she says, “it is important to keep moving forward and looking at the larger picture in terms of how do we improve our practice?”

JO still does conference interpreting and Deaf Blind work. Work in K-12 educational settings is peripheral now, but she still keeps up with what is happening in the state. This year has been a big one for her with bringing ITOC back onto the table. She recently co-presented with Holly Alfred, Chair of the Minority Interpreter Group, in Massachusetts where their goal was to highlight the availability of resources in the region that focus on multicultural issues.

In October 2014 JO hosted the BUCIE conference, “Building your Comunidad IQ: Working with, in, and alongside the Latino Deaf Community.” She wants to see more community collaboration. She wants majority culture interpreters informed and educated so that they know more and can do better with the communities they serve. Even when you are not a trilingual interpreter, there are still tools that you need to have when you are working with a Deaf person who is also Latino. She comments, “If they [Deaf person] have another culture and you don’t have access to it, it’s being left on the cutting room floor at the end of every job.”

JO is passionate about connecting and networking. She believes that just by working together we will see an impact because, as she states, “the learning that you can do by the virtue of being present is better than the one you can do by being on the job.” JO suggests that leadership is stuffing envelopes, being the support person, and sometimes just sitting there. She claims, “it allows you to gain access and proximity in a way you do not get to do on the job.”

Because of social media we are getting a better idea of how people think. In our professional dialogues the discussion of diversity is often between Deaf and hearing, but we do not discuss multicultural groups often. What happens when you are also a person of color who is Deaf? The Deaf/hearing binary is not our only issue, as a profession we need to look at other factors. When you look at United States Census Bureau projections, Latinos will be the largest minority by 2060 (2012) but when you look at RID statistics (2013) we have under 400 Latino interpreters in RID which is not representative of the cultures that are out there.

Another concern and motivating factor is the unstable socioeconomic settings of many interpreters, especially those in rural settings, who have little access to resources. This lack of resources inhibits their ability to grow professionally. Many are out there making \$10 or less per hour, which doesn't promote the ability to fly to another state and go to a conference. JO urges us to look at the profession as a whole and figure out how we can reach out to everybody. We have a lot of interpreters in places where they are forced to work alone, without teams. With or without credentials, they are interpreting and they are one of us and we need to figure out how to reach them.

Over time JO has learned to become more patient. She thinks one thing we could do differently is remember that people want to be approached personally. When you directly reach out, people are more likely to step up in community cultures. Our field often refers to the Deaf community as a collectivist culture, and to the hearing community as individualistic. This statement is too broad and is not true for many of us who are from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Many of us are from backgrounds where caring for our community as a whole supersedes the immediate needs of the individual. When working with and among these community cultures we need to remember the value of direct contact. If we want more involvement from a group, then we need to understand what they need. We are all busy, many people don't have resources and it takes effort and time but, she says, "We need leaders to say I want to do something different today."

There is a long history of approaches and attempts to reach out to the community of interpreters and stakeholders that have not been successful, though JO sees that the RID is currently trying to make changes in the way the organization reaches out to its constituency. While the climate is shifting in our field, the playing ground remains uncertain. We have different leadership now and their approaches to doing leadership are remarkably different when compared to where we were just a few years ago. JO remarked that in the instances when the opportunity for leadership was declined it was because of where she was at the moment. She doesn't regret saying no when she has turned offers down because leadership is such an important value. It requires time and effort, and she really wants to be attentive to what people think about where we should be going as a practice.

Family is her first priority. She says her son is at the perfect age “to be loved and squeezed” so she is focusing on family when she is not working. She believes that balance is important. We must balance being a business with being an ally. She believes we need to learn how to talk about these things. She sees herself returning to leadership positions in the coming years and needs to figure out what is the best place for her to be able to make change. She also admits that as a Latina who works in a majority culture, sometimes there are extra doubts that come up for a number of reasons. Yet, she says “if you take the chance to be present you are going to learn so much which makes you a better practitioner and a better person.”

JO accepts being seen as a leader, but says she is also a “fantastic follower”. She says that maybe it is not her place to lead and if someone else is leading, then she can be a follower. Knowing when to support others in whatever it is that they need to do is a form of leadership. She is able to understand that we are constantly changing as a profession and as people. We all have multiple skills and talents and we will not always know what to do. She defines herself as, “a leader, a follower, and sometimes as something else.”

JO holds national certification: CI, CT, ED: k-12, and NIC-Advanced through RID. More importantly though, she is a woman, a mother, a wife, and a friend. She always loves first and cannot say her son Joaquin’s name without undertones of adoration and pride. She says she is fallible and quick to accept when she is wrong. She is passionate about making things right. She believes that communication and honesty are our biggest faults. She says, “If you have it [honesty] then we get much further, but it takes so much risk.”

She is a singer, photographer, does art, and really believes in people. She believes that gratitude is important because we do not travel alone; we have mentors, both Deaf and hearing that add to our lives. She says, “We are never done learning and need to learn more to do better for the people around us.” JO says she doesn’t know if she has had her biggest accomplishment yet, but whatever it is she says, “it will be the next thing that we can all do together.”

About the Author

Erica West Oyedele is a nationally certified sign language interpreter working primarily in Northern California. She has her bachelor's degree in Deaf Studies from California State University, Sacramento and her Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies from Western Oregon University.

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